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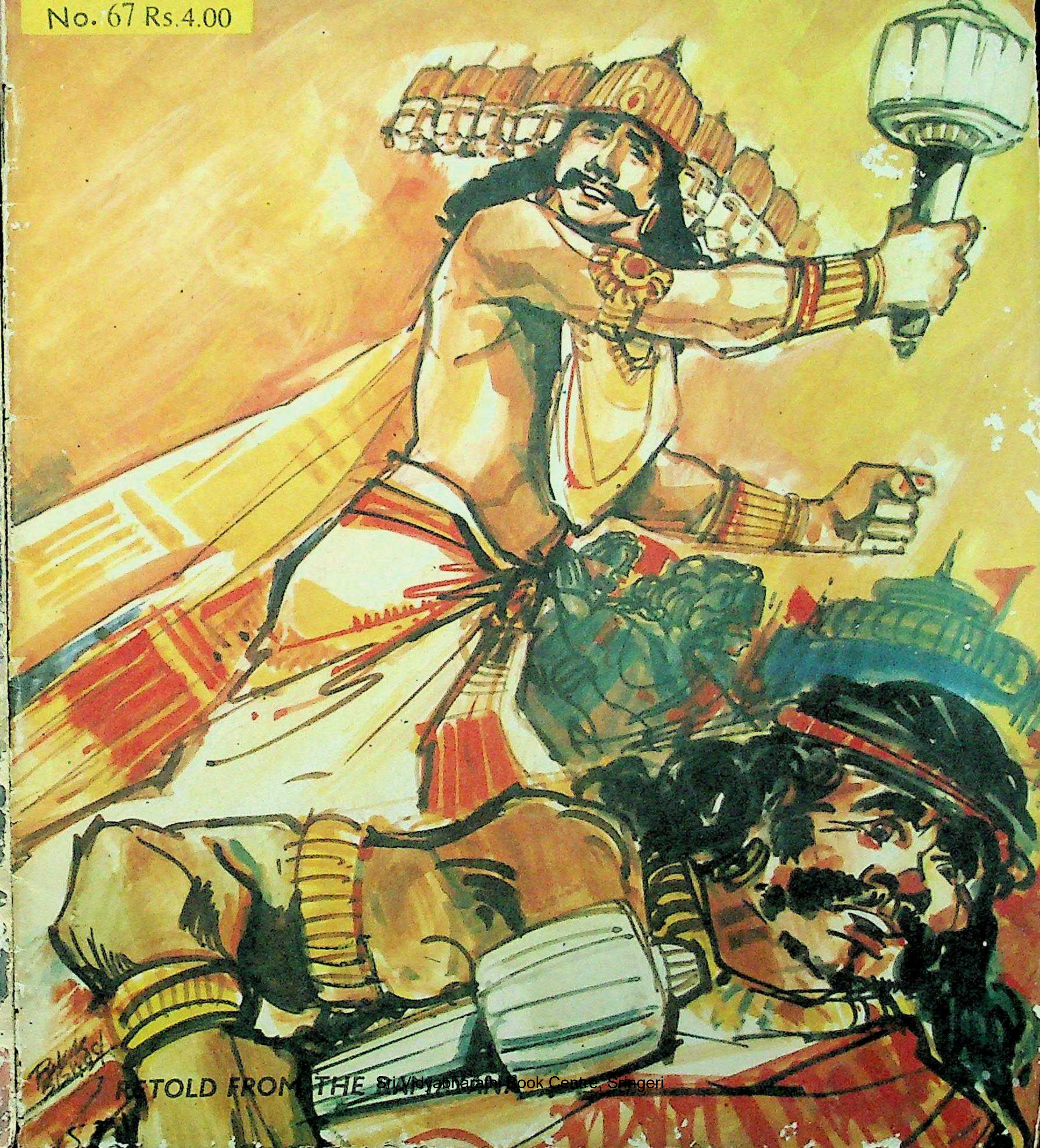

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The *Ramayana* of Valmiki is considered to be the oldest epic of India. Unlike the *Mahabharata*, the story of Rama has no historical foundation. Yet the poem has become an intrinsic part of Hindu life. The victory of Rama, symbolic of the good forces, over Ravana, symbolic of the evil forces, is still celebrated all over India during the Dassera festival, held around October.

The story of Rama has inspired many to write poems and scholarly treatises. A number of versions of the story are prevalent, not only in Sanskrit, the language in which Valmiki wrote his *Ramayana* but also in Hindi, Bengali, Tamil and other Indian languages. During the course of time, what was basically a straightforward adventurous story underwent so much of transformation that Rama has been worshipped at least for a thousand years.

Sumali, a Rakshasa king, comes from the nether-world to the world of men in search of a groom for his daughter, Kaikesi. He is impressed by the mighty Kubera, son of Vishrava. He argues that if his daughter were to marry Vishrava, she would have sons as mighty as Kubera. Kaikesi marries Vishrava, but is fated to beget Rakshasa children, the eldest of whom is Ravana. Urged by his ambitious mother, Ravana puts forward his claim to be the Lord of Lanka. Thereafter follow a number of adventures, ultimately leading to the siege of Lanka by Rama.

The story, as narrated here, is based on the *Uttara Kanda* of Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

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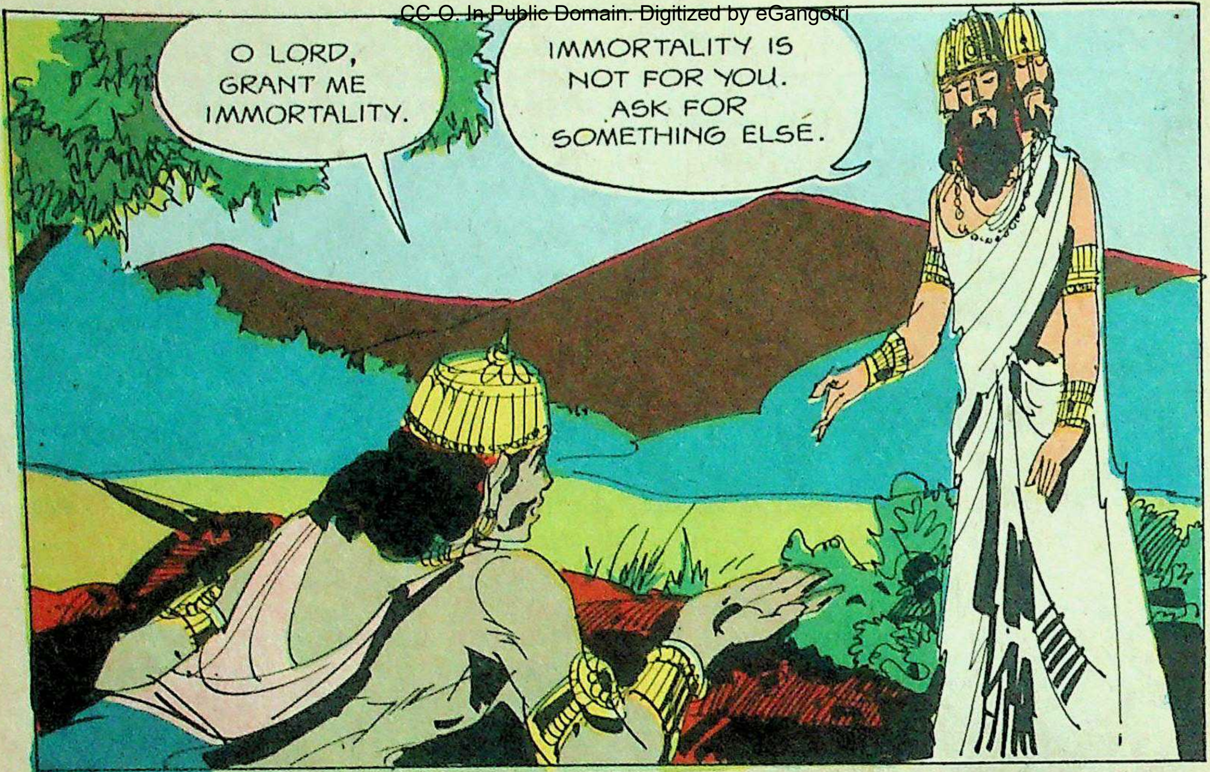

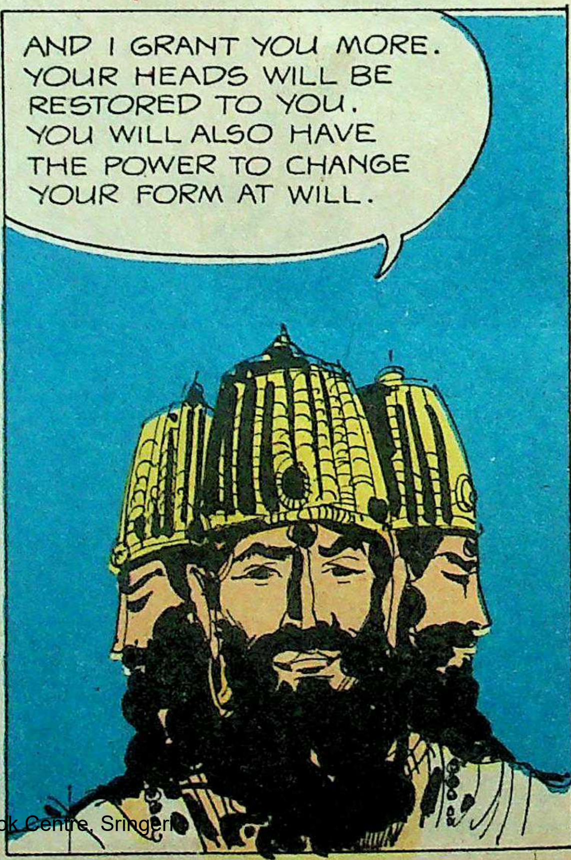

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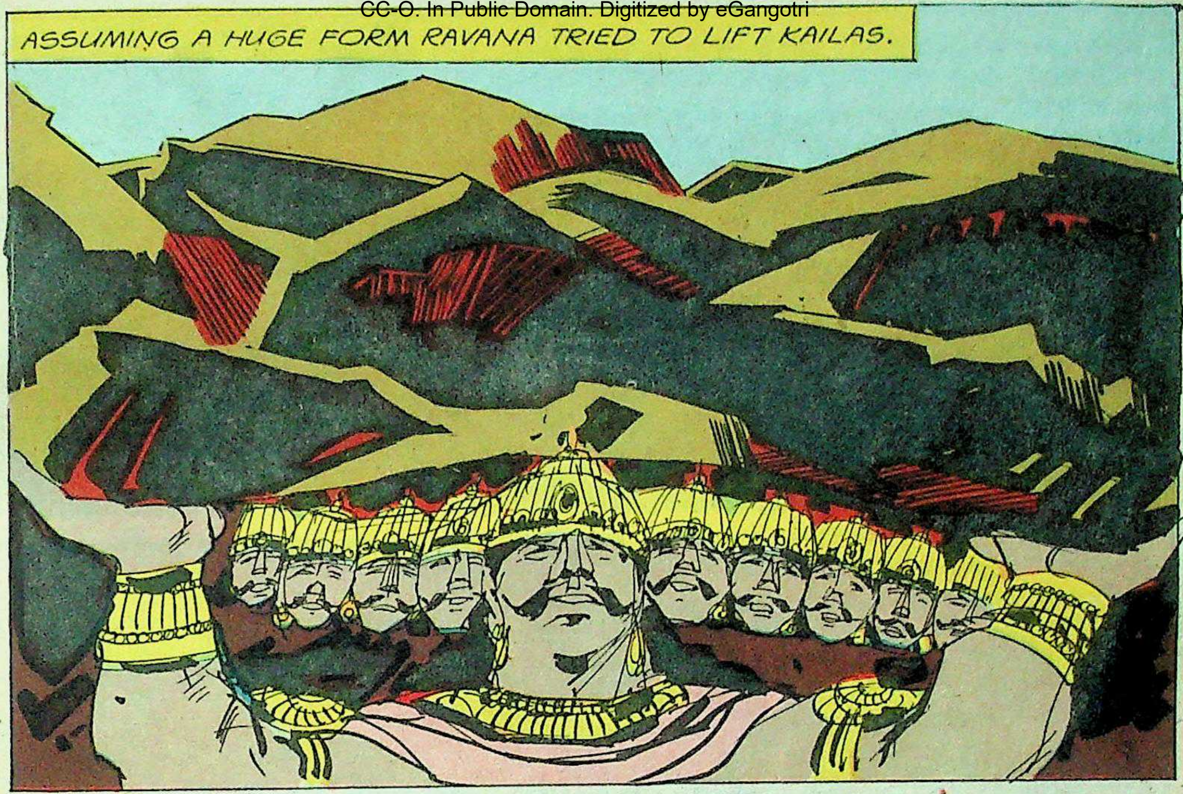

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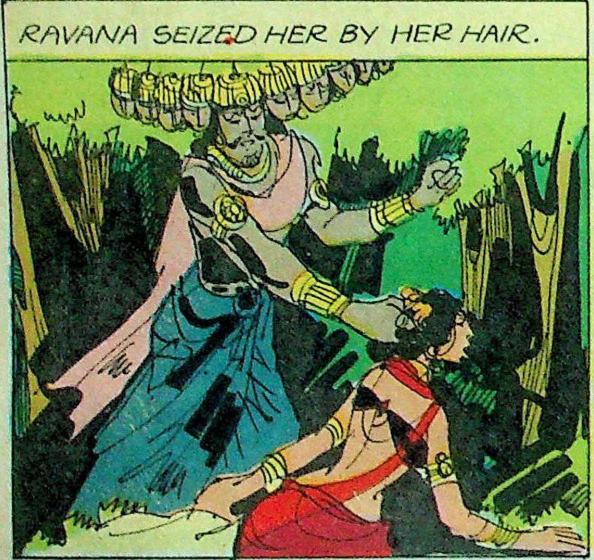

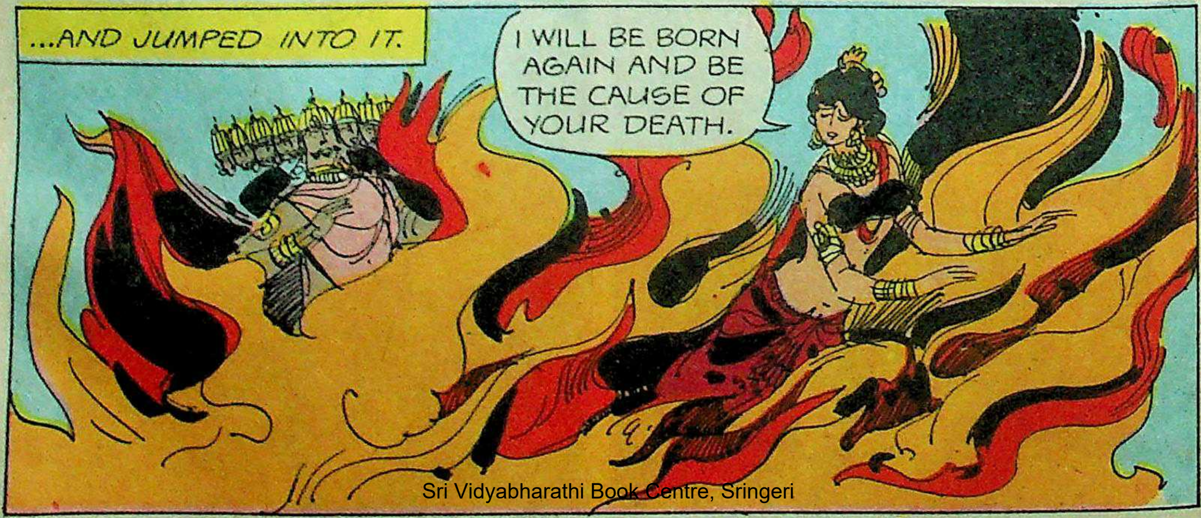

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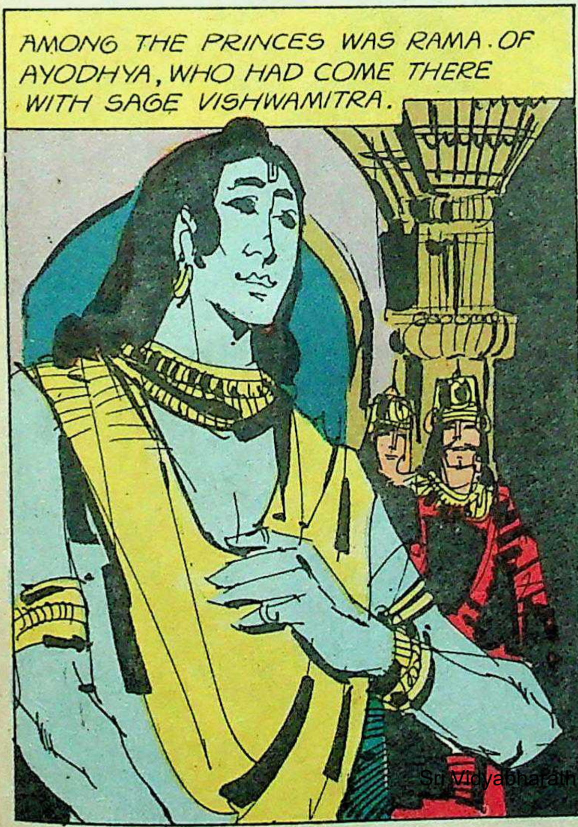

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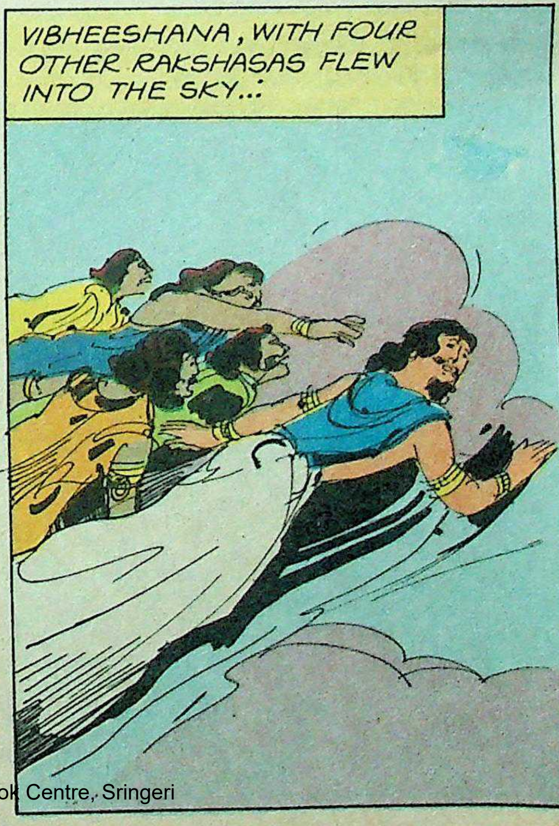

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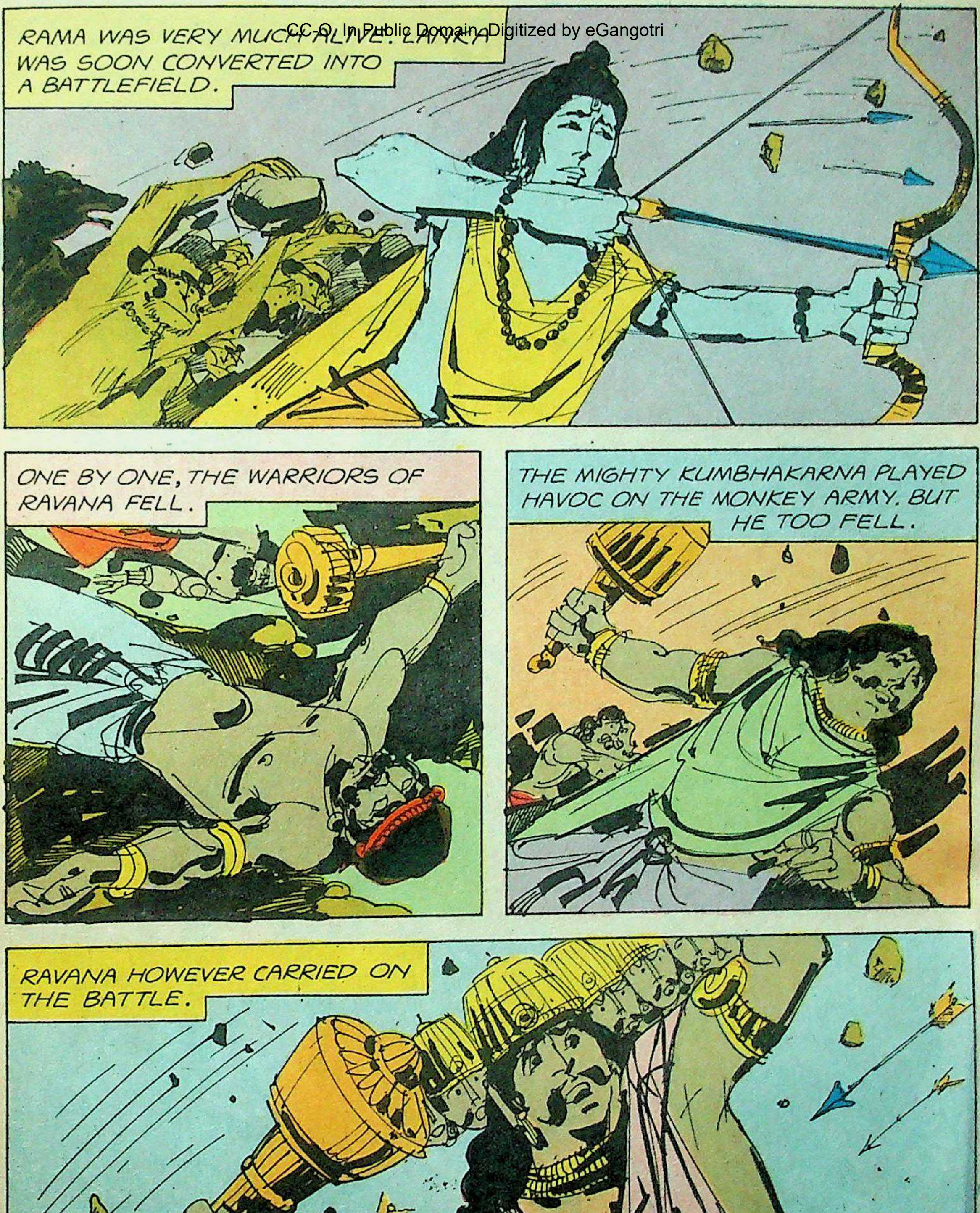

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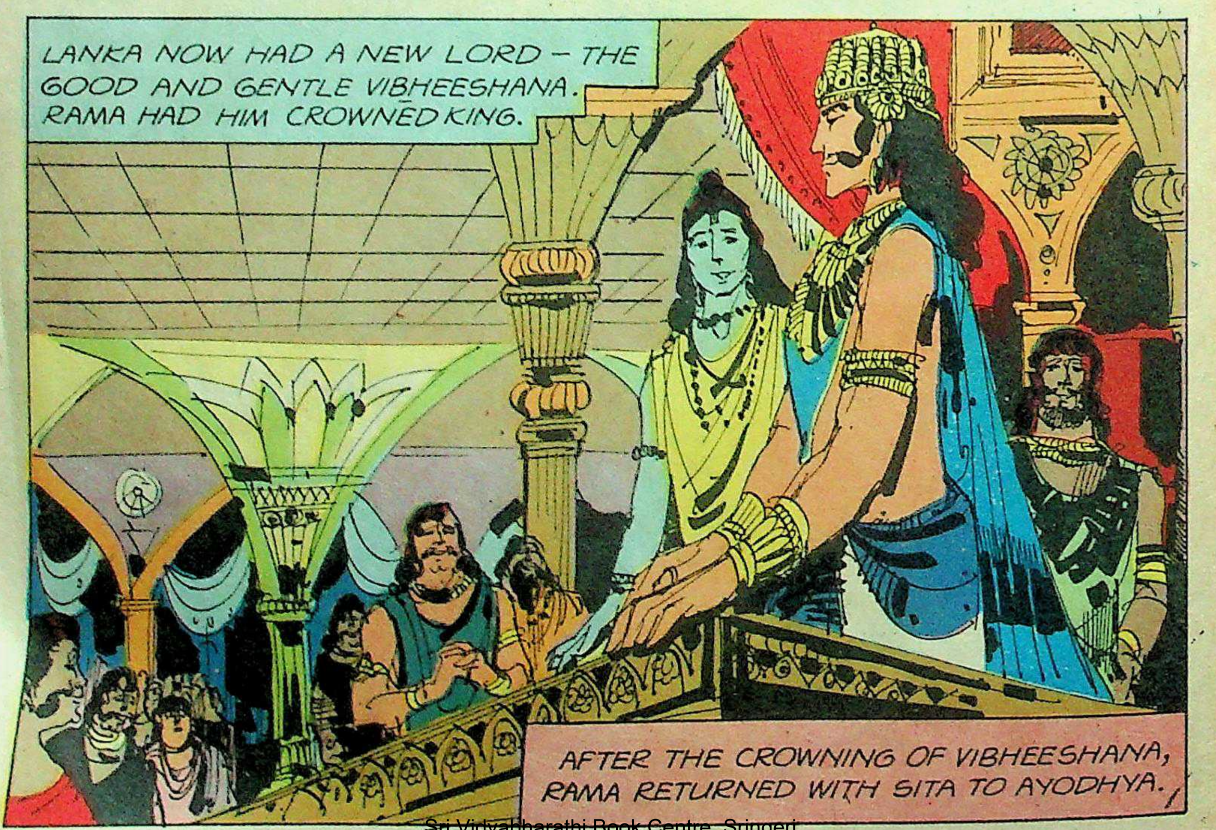

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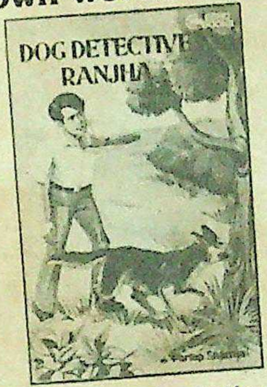

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Now I heard the car door open in the distance and Woof shouting as loudly as he could, "Ranjha, scent! Track! Arrest!"

I heard him and stopped. And put my nose to the ground and started meandering in search of a scent. Yes, there it was. Very strong. A human scent. A female scent, mixed with a smell of paint and paper. Suddenly, wham! I was up against a football-sized object on the ground. It was the severed head.

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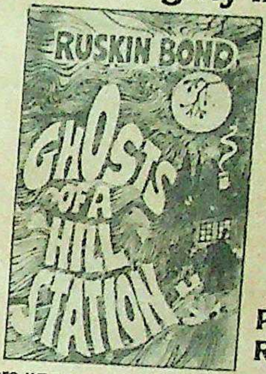

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Just then there was a knocking on the door.

"Who's there?" I called.

Silence. And then, again, the knocking, and this time a voice, low and insistent: "Please let me in, please let me in..."

I stepped forward, unbolted the door, and flung it open.

She stood outside in the rain. Not the pale, beautiful one, but a wizened old hag with bloodless lips and flaring nostrils and—but where were the eyes? No eyes, no eyes!

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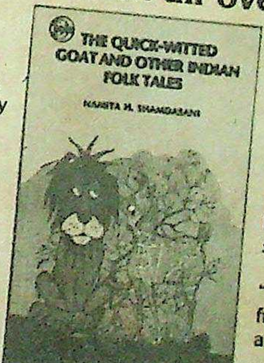

Gratefully, Buddhu walked out. And to every farmer he met on his way, he said proudly, "I hold my son's name in my fist." And then one of them wanted to see it. Buddhu slowly opened his fist. But alas! There was nothing in it! "Oh, dear," he wept. "It's fallen into this hay." And he promptly borrowed a hoe and began to rake through the hay for the lost name.

A farmer's wife who happened to be passing that way stopped and asked Buddhu what he was doing. When he told her, she exclaimed, "It's simply stupid."

Buddhu was delighted. "You are right. I am so grateful to you that I will give you a reward...a bull," he cried.

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